TEMPLE STUDIES GROUP

Symposium II – Temple Music: Meaning and Influence

How the Hebrew Masoretic Text Preserves the Vocal Music of the Second Temple

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What would it mean for us if we had access to the melodic rendition of Hebrew Scripture as it was performed in the Second Temple? What light would it shed on the origins of liturgy in the Synagogue and in the Church, the origins and history of Western music in general, the nature of music in the Ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean, the exegesis of Hebrew Scripture, or (from a deeper, theologically based perspective) on the origins, nature and purpose of music itself?[2]

Such questions are far too broad for me to answer satisfactorily in a short presentation in a symposium such as this. What I *can* do is to point out that the key to answering these questions (in great detail) now exists and is being considered seriously by many (though regrettably not all) in the fields concerned. I hope that today's brief summary of that key will prove profitable to you all.

Persistent traditions in the Jewish community point to a link (either direct or indirect) between the music performed by the biblical prophets, psalmists and Levites and a set of special signs[3] found above and below the words in the Hebrew Masoretic Text: the "musical accents" or (in Hebrew) *te`amim* (literally "tastes").[4] Specialists generally agree that these accents serve three functions. They define the melody to which the Hebrew text is to be sung in public or private performance; they divide the text into verses, clauses and phrases and connect words within phrases; and they mark the primary and secondary stressed syllables of the words.[5]

Since the time this notation appeared in our extant manuscripts by the mid-800's of our Common Era, the essential argument has been over whether the *melodic* or the *divisive and connective* (that is, the *syntactic*) function predominates.[6] Masoretic scholars and grammarians have maintained that the *syntactic* function predominates.[7] Cantors have maintained that the *melodic* function predominates.[8] Yet from both perspectives, the accents actually are treated as if the *syntactic* function predominates, allowing melodic interpretations to be added arbitrarily and almost at will by the various Jewish communities.[9]

Some have realized that this explanation of the meaning and function of the accentuation is inadequate (implying that the accents' *original* meaning was lost by some means), and have sought

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[1] SLIDE: Opening slide with title and name of author and suitable background.
[2] SLIDE: Asking these questions, or else giving a good series of slides on the Second Temple.
[3] SLIDE: Illustration of manuscript of the Masoretic Text (preferably Aleppo Codex).
[4] SLIDE: Illustration of printed Masoretic Text, Letteris Edition (preferably the same section as that cited in Aleppo).
[5] SLIDE: Illustration of three functions of accentuation.
[6] SLIDE: Argument over which function predominates: melodic, or syntactic?
[7] SLIDE: Syntactic hierarchy by Solomon Rosowsky for prose accents in the *Torah*.
[8] SLIDE: Table of Masoretic musical interpretations (Israel Yeivin).
[9] SLIDE: Table of tropes (partial, make it as wide as possible).

to derive their own. Thomas Ravenscroft put it this way, as early as 1621, in his *Preface* to *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*, an early English metrical Psalter:[10]

> *In my* opinion*, 'tis too Laborious a* taske *for any* Man *to study the attainement of the* Hebrew Musicall Accents*; For the* Tunes *used in* Dauids *Time, are too farre remoued from* our *understanding. For albeit the* Hebrew Musicall Characters *are placed sometimes* aboue *the Letter, sometimes* beneath*, yet the knowledge of what* was *signified by those* Notes *and* Characters*, was onely continued by* Tradition*, and is now utterly lost, though* many *at sundry times (as appeareth by their writings) have gone about to reuiue* it*: But hauing no better subject to worke upon, than their owne weak conjectures, they haue but a* little *preuailed.*

By "tradition", of course, Ravenscroft meant an authoritative and clear chain of transmission, about which we can now be more detailed than in his time. In particular, we have testimony that the accents were transmitted from Moses and the prophets via Ezra to a priestly family in Second Temple times called the Elders of Bathyra, who then "established the accents of Scripture" and transmitted them to the medieval Karaites and Masoretes. Between the times of the Elders of Bathyra and the Karaites and Masoretes, however, while the notation survived essentially intact, those who knew and taught its original meaning did not. This may be thanks to the preservation of "pointed" texts in caves "near Jericho" which were rediscovered in 800 CE. [11]

Recovering the lost original meaning of the accentuation has proven one of the knottiest problems in musicology. From all evidence, the reason is this: what is actually a primarily *melodic* notation was *reinterpreted* by the Masoretes and grammarians as if it were primarily a *syntactic* one, using the Hebrew verbal syntax itself as a guide to reconstruct its meaning.[12] Not until 1976 did the late Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura, an organist, composer and music theorist in Paris, put forward an interpretation that truly treats the accentuation as primarily *melodic*, an interpretation that likewise uses the Hebrew verbal syntax as the only possible, infallible guide to a correct reconstruction of the melodic meaning.[13] In this short presentation I can mention only the highlights of her "deciphering key", which is explained at great length in her publications.[14]

The accentuation of the Masoretic Text exists in two systems. The music they contain is analogous to the ancient Greek forms of melodic recitation called *prosodia* and *psalmodia*. In the primary system, that of *prosodia*, eight common signs below the words determine the eight degrees of a modal, diatonic-chromatic scale, with the tonic or *finale* on the third degree of the octave. [15] In the secondary system, that of *psalmodia*, seven signs below the words determine the eight degrees of a modal, diatonic-chromatic scale, with the tonic or *finale* on the second degree of the octave. [16] *Psalmodia* is used in Psalms, Proverbs and the body of Job. *Prosodia* is used in the prologue and epilogue of Job and in all the other books, sometimes in texts that have a poetic structure very much like that found in Psalms. Both systems are founded in *divisive (just) tuning*, which differs at significant points from the *cyclical (Pythagorean) tuning* also used in high antiquity. [17]

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[10] SLIDE: Text of Thomas Ravenscroft's comments, with citation of source and date.
[11] SLIDE: Chain of transmission from Moses and the prophets through Ezra, the Elders of Bathyra, the Karaites and the Masoretes.
[12] SLIDE: "A Page Turns in History…" (from original slideshow).
[13] SLIDE: Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura, with biographical notes.
[14] SLIDE: Several slides showing her various publications.
[15] SLIDE: Table of prosodic sublinear accents (from original slideshow).
[16] SLIDE: Table of psalmodic sublinear accents (from original slideshow).
[17] SLIDE: Usage of accents in the two systems (from original slideshow).

In both *prosodia* and *psalmodia*, the pitch represented by any accent below the words is sustained in value until another accent appears below the words.[18] Along the way, ornaments of one to three notes represented by accents above the words may intervene on one syllable or even on part of a syllable, each deriving its relative pitch from that of the accent that precedes it below the words.[19] In this and in other aspects, the accentuation has features in common with certain written *neumes* of the Christian Middle Ages. (One of these, the Armenian liturgical notation,[20] likewise lost its meaning for similar reasons and has been deciphered recently using similar means.[21])

Again like the *neumes* and related musical notations, the Hebrew accents comprise a transcription of gestures of the hands and fingers: a system of *chironomy*, in principle like that known from ancient Egypt and many other ancient nations.[22] My major contribution to this research has been the reconstruction of the chironomy behind the written notation. The accents below the words apparently correspond to gestures made with the *left* hand, just as the accents above the words apparently correspond to gestures made with the *right* hand.[23]

The most surprising thing for many people about Haïk-Vantoura's deciphering process is the *strongly "tonal" nature* of its results. Yet the simplicity and completeness of Haïk-Vantoura's deciphering key must be given its due. [24] So must the structurally "harmonic" interweaving of the resulting melodies with the words, in a way that suggests on its face that every biblical passage "from Moses to Malachi" was created, taught and transmitted as "art song", of a sort that aptly reflects the traditional authorship of the various passages and books and the historical and religious circumstances in which the various authors lived. [25]

No better way of illustrating what I have just summarized exists than the performance of samples of the music reconstructed from the Letteris Edition of the Masoretic Text.[26] I conclude this presentation with one brief selection from the Prophets and one brief selection from the Psalms, [27]both of which are taken from *La musique de la Bible révélée (Volume 3)* by Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura.

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[18] SLIDE: A partial table of the accents in *prosodia* and their interrelationships.
[19] SLIDE: A partial table of the accents in *psalmodia* and their interrelationships.
[20] SLIDE: Graphic of Armenian notation from Haïk-Vantoura's book.
[21] SLIDE: Graphic of Armenian notation's decipherment as published in ARMENIA TODAY.
[22] SLIDE: Hans Hickmann's reconstruction of the Egyptian scale (from original slideshow).
[23] SLIDE: Illustration of reconstruction of Hebrew chironomy (if possible from original slideshow).
[24] SLIDE: Summary of crucial points of Haïk-Vantoura's key.
[25] SLIDE: Heading of Psalms 23 superimposed over fat-tailed sheep grazing in the Galilee.
[26] SLIDE: Isaiah 60:1-5, Letteris Edition and Editions Choudens (from original slide show).
[27] SLIDE: Psalms 148, Letteris Edition and Editions Choudens (from original slide show).